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Robert L. Oakley: In Memoriam

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¶24 In my own religious tradition we would end a memorial service with the words, “May his memory be eternal.”

¶25 Happy Birthday, Bob; *ave atque vale*.⁷

James V. Feinerman*

¶26 In January 1968, the *New York Times* Magazine printed a speech prepared by George F. Kennan for the dedication of a new library at Swarthmore College under the title “Rebels Without a Program.” The response from students and teachers on the campuses was so great that a book was prepared, titled *Democracy and the Student Left*.⁸ Among the student respondents was the young Bob Oakley.

¶27 Kennan’s basic message was that student radicals opposing the Vietnam War had ruined their universities as bastions of detached scholarship and serious learning. He decried both their violent and nonviolent protests and civil disobedience as emotional and misdirected—even before the events at Columbia in 1968, Cornell and Harvard in 1969, and Yale and Kent State in 1970! Bob’s letter was a rare combination of reason and balance, allowing that Mr. Kennan might have a point but speaking very poignantly and personally about the dilemmas that his generation faced. It made a deep impression on me a year later when I read it as a college freshman myself. When I finally met Bob when I first came to Georgetown, I asked him if he was “*the* Bob Oakley.” Assuming I meant the State Department official with the same name, Bob modestly said, “No—I’m the librarian Bob Oakley.” But when I pressed him as to whether he wrote the letter responding to George Kennan, he owned up to being that Bob Oakley, a little surprised that anyone still remembered.

¶28 In an afterword in the book, replying to the letters, Kennan set out his ultimate position:

In the final analysis, the question of civil disobedience is, I am sure, a matter of temperament. Humanity divides, it has been said, between those who, in the political philosophy, place the emphasis on order and those who place it on justice. I belong in the first of those categories. Human justice is always imperfect. The laws on which it bases itself are always to some extent unjust. These laws have therefore only a relative value; and it is only relative benefits that can be expected from the efforts to improve them. But the good order of society is something tangible and solid.⁹

7. “Hail and farewell.” SELECT POEMS OF CATULLUS CI (Francis P. Simpson ed., new rev. ed. 1880).

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8. GEORGE F. KENNAN, DEMOCRACY AND THE STUDENT LEFT (1968).

9. *Id.* at 170.

¶29 As Bob's letter to Kennan (set out below) indicates, even as a college senior he understood that this was a false dichotomy. He spent the rest of his life, in his chosen field, demonstrating by his work that one could attempt to achieve both order and justice.

Ithaca, N.Y., January 23, 1968

To the Editor:

Mr. Kennan's article about the relationship between detachment and genuine scholarship has certainly been needed for a long time. It is an article which I hope everyone in the New Left will read with care. The ultimate truth of what Kennan says I cannot deny, but an indication of causes for the loss of detachment is, I fear, absent from his analysis.

Students today are increasingly faced with the knowledge that their scholarly pursuits are strictly limited, that soon they will be forcefully taken to perform menial tasks to contribute to a war they dislike. Or worse, they know they may be put into a position of sacrificing their lives for what they see as rather nebulous and hardly noble goals, pursuant to a policy which they find abhorrent and in which they seem to have no voice. It is extremely difficult to maintain a sense of detachment with one's thoughts subject to constant interruption by such prospects. The presence of those who profit by deluding others is another disruptive force on campus. Among these pushers I include not only those who sell drugs which lead to a retreat from reality but also those who come with a propaganda message, not with a deep concern for the truth. Recruiters, particularly those of the military, come with such an aim. Military men are trained in the art of warfare, their recruiters, perhaps in the art of rhetoric, but not in the quest for truth; their presence, then, is just as destructive to a sense of detachment as the presence of those "students" whose primary concern is commitment, regardless of the truth of what they are committed to. Perhaps the very openness of the modern academic community has been partly responsible for this crisis in scholarship: one must expect that encroachment by the outside world will have its effect by making students aware that they are not detached.

One also wonders at the priorities of the government which commits crimes against scholarship by channeling it according to their wishes. They permit those whose goal is to delve into the intricacies of nature (usually called scientists) to continue their education because the products of such tinkering are immediately accessible and important: they lead to better bridges, television sets, and bombs. But those dedicated to the discovery of human truths, hopefully leading to understanding and peace—a task which requires far more detachment—are forced to live with constant uncertainty.

One must certainly admire a man like Mr. Kennan who can remain detached. Even though many, for various reasons, feel more attraction to commitment than detachment, those of us who prefer the latter often cannot find it. This summer I will be faced with the decision of whether to accept the duties this society demands, and deny my conscience, or to do something else, and perhaps lead a life of great trial and difficulty thenceforth. Facing such alternatives as these, detachment is a difficult road to follow.

The modern university often sees itself, as does the outside community, as a service institution for the community, rather than a place where pursuit of truth and knowledge, simply, is the highest end. This explains the current vogue emphasizing science; it explains the presence of recruiters; and, it also explains why there are draft deferments. Perhaps the real source of the crisis today is that our massive multiversities are becoming mere vocational schools, instead of places for consideration of the eternal questions and truths about man.

Mr. Kennan described the symptoms of what I, with him, consider to be a crisis in scholarship. What remains to be done is to suggest a means of re-creating the genuine student, that is, to provide an atmosphere where detached, leisured pursuit of truth and knowledge is once again possible.

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Dean T. Alexander Aleinikoff*

¶30 Bob was a visionary leader and strong advocate for the Georgetown Law Library. He was a builder—of buildings, of collections, of organizations, of community. In a city of monuments and memorials, Bob's monument is the library he built. Bob was always striving to make the library a leader in innovative collections and services.

¶31 When Bob became director of the library in 1982, the library held 379,000 volumes. Twenty-five years later, there are more than one million volumes. When Bob arrived, there was one Lexis terminal. Now we have one of the most technologically sophisticated law libraries in the world. In 1982, the library occupied two floors of the McDonough Building. In partnership with successive deans, Bob planned and oversaw construction of library facilities that now include the Edward

10. *Id.* at 78–81.

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Bennett Williams Library and the John Wolff International and Comparative Law Library.

¶32 As we move forward, we will need to keep his vision of the “library of the future” alive: one of collaborative learning spaces for our students and close working relationships between our talented library staff and professors, aided by state-of-the-art technology.

¶33 We will miss him deeply but cherish all that he did for our campus and community.